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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 GUANGZHOU 000654

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/CM, EAP/PD, PA, R, INR/EAP, DRL

E.O. 12958: 12/02/2034

TAGS: [KPAO](#) [KMDR](#) [PREL](#) [EINT](#) [SOCI](#) [CH](#)

SUBJECT: Anatomy of a Media Murder: How Beijing Killed  
the President's Southern Weekend Interview

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(U) Classified by Consul General Brian L. Goldbeck for  
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: President Obama gave only one interview during his visit to China, and he chose Guangzhou's Southern Weekend (Nanfang Zhoumo), a paper the New York Times called "China's most influential liberal newspaper." Reporters in Guangzhou, working for the Southern Daily Group or closely associated with the Southern Weekend (strictly protect all), have confirmed that the paper was the victim of centrally-directed, extensive interference and ongoing censorship. End summary.

¶2. (C) After learning that Embassy Beijing had contacted Southern Weekend to arrange an interview with the President, close media contacts confirmed to ConGenOffs that the Communist Party Central Propaganda Department (Zhong Xuan Bu) was not happy. On Tuesday, November 17, the Central Propaganda Department provided the Southern Weekend a list of the government's questions and instructed the paper to use questions from the list.

¶3. (C) By the time of the interview on Wednesday morning, November 18, and, media contacts confirm, after significant back and forth between the paper and Chinese Communist Party (CCP) propaganda officials in Beijing, Southern Weekend was permitted to ask two (out of seven) of its own questions, albeit with Central Propaganda Department modifications.

¶4. (C) For its third question, Southern Weekend wanted to ask: "Regarding international cooperation, in what areas do you expect China to play a more important role?" The Central Propaganda Department insisted that the question be: "What is your opinion about U.S.-China cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region?"

¶5. (C) For its fourth question, Southern Weekend wanted to ask: "Regarding China-U.S. trade, one important but pending, long-term problem concerns when America will give China 'market economy status.' What is your attitude toward this issue?" The Central Propaganda Department changed the question to: "The U.S. has not given China 'market economy status.' What difficulties exist in

doing so?"

Newspaper Not Available at Newsstands in Guangzhou

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¶16. (SBU) The President's interview took place on Wednesday, November 18, and should have been published on Thursday, November 19. Although the paper was available at kiosks in Beijing, Post visited three separate kiosks in Guangzhou and was told the paper's release would be delayed until Friday. (Comment: Post's media-watchers are unaware of the paper's publication ever being delayed by a day. The delayed release at newsstands in Guangzhou was suspicious considering that home delivery on Thursday, November 19 occurred on time. Most of Southern Weekend's papers are sold at newspaper kiosks, not by subscription. End comment.)

The Paperboy Vandal

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¶17. (C) Embassy Beijing notified Post that Thursday home deliveries in Beijing and Shanghai were anything but normal -- the interview, which was published on page 2 of the paper, had been torn out of some copies, resulting in a sizable hole on the paper's front page. In response to these reports of vandalism in Beijing and Shanghai, Post contacted universities, media and libraries in Guangzhou to determine if the interview had been ripped out in Guangzhou, but received no reports suggesting censored home deliveries.

Bury the Body

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¶18. (C) Close media contacts confirm that the Central Propaganda Department ordered Southern Weekend to bury the interview. Southern Weekend planned to devote its front page to the interview and to publish a whole page of stories about the President's visit. The Central Propaganda Department ordered the paper to reduce coverage to a half page and not put it on the cover. Media contacts confirm that positive stories discussing the President's visit -- including the President's handwritten note offering his best wishes to Southern Weekend and photo of the President holding the paper -- were banned.

¶19. (SBU) The President's handwritten note stated: "To the Southern Weekly and its readers -- I look forward to continuing the ties between our two countries, and congratulate you for contributing to the analysis and flow of vital policy information. An educated citizenry is the key to an effective government, and a free press contributes to that well-informed citizenry. /s/ Barack Obama"

Southern Weekend Complies, but "Salutes" Beijing with White Space Protest

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¶10. (C) Because Southern Weekend abruptly was ordered to limit coverage to a half page and move the interview off the cover, the paper was forced to change its layout. Rather than move other news into the gaps appearing on the first and second pages, the paper created two large in-house advertisements to fill the blank spaces.

¶11. (C) Both advertisements were abnormally Spartan, with 90 percent white space and words in unusually small font, the cumulative visual effect emphasizing the large white spaces and lack of news. The text of the cover advertisement stated: "We don't have exclusive interviews

every week, but read Southern Weekend every week to understand China." In that day's paper, one who read Southern Weekend "to understand China" was provided mostly with white space. The text in the page 2 advertisement read: "Not everyone can become influential, but everyone can read and understand China here." Again, the understanding of China that the reader took away from looking at the paper was that something -- a substantial amount of something -- was missing, and the cryptic "not everyone can become influential," a message to those who actually wield influence in Beijing. Five media contacts have confirmed the advertisements' double meanings were deliberate protests to Beijing censors; local media contacts currently are waiting to see how Beijing responds.

#### Black Holes in Cyberspace, or Linkless Posting

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¶12. (C) To limit the interview's exposure, the Central Propaganda Department ordered that the Southern Daily Group (Southern Weekend's parent company) official online version not include the interview as a html webpage. This e-version normally is an exact reproduction of the print version. (Note: The censorship was still in place as of December 1; see <http://nf.nfdaily.cn/epaper/nfzm/content/20091119/PageA01CJ.htm>. Page A1 advertises the interview on page A2, but there is no html page for A2. End note.)

¶13. (C) The Central Propaganda Department did permit the Southern Weekend to post the interview on its website news site but with two caveats: there could be no mention of the interview on the Southern Weekend homepage, and there could be no links taking the reader to the interview. The majority of readers visiting the website, therefore, would have seen no mention of the interview or links to the interview. A reader looking for the interview could find it by searching "Obama" from the

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homepage (<http://www.infzm.com/>). The interview may still be viewed here:  
<http://www.infzm.com/content/20091118.shtml>.

#### Please Pretend That It Never Happened

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¶14. (C) After the interview, the Central Propaganda Department issued an internal order to all state-run media stating that no media were permitted to republish the Southern Weekend interview or photo of the President giving the interview. The order stated: "Re: Central Propaganda Department order, U.S. President Obama interview with Southern Weekend, this news story may not be republished by any media including websites."

¶15. (C) At the bottom of the specific order issued to Guangzhou, an official from the Central Propaganda Department (signature illegible) wrote: "Director General Wan (i.e., Wan Xiaoling, head of Guangzhou's Propaganda Department), all media in Guangzhou should implement this order." This internal order that was issued to Guangzhou media outlets now circulates on the Internet.

#### 40,000 Other Voices on Censorship and Press Freedom

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¶16. (SBU) Censorship of the Southern Weekend interview has attracted substantial attention online, both amongst China netizens and in overseas Chinese media based in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore. Based upon a Google search of "Southern Weekend, interview, Obama, and blog (in Chinese)," Post estimates 40,000 blogs and tweets, the majority of which are pro-freedom of expression and voice disappointment with Beijing's censorship.

¶17. (C) Influential blogger Yao Yijiang acknowledged that the buried, limited exposure was a necessary compromise, but applauded the President for choosing a non-pro-government paper as a powerful message to and victory for average Chinese people. Lan Enfa asked "Why is Southern Weekend's interview so short?," and then answered his own question, stating that it could be "sadly" understood if one studied the two, half-page and almost-blank advertisements. Lan Enfa praised Southern Weekend for sticking to its principles and bravely dealing with Beijing's censors. Southern Weekend staff, using pseudonyms, said the paper was not allowed to conduct an in-depth interview, and even the President's brief comments on human rights and freedom of the press were censored. Shi Feike, a leading writer for Southern Weekend Magazine, tweeted that the interview obviously upset the Chinese Communist Party and had made Beijing-based media jealous.

¶18. (C) Overseas Chinese voices received attention on the Mainland, too. Popular blogger Jiang Jiaoyong republished Radio Free Asia's broadcast, which said that veteran Chinese journalists think the online ban and limited exposure exemplifies the typical approach taken by the Chinese government. China's most influential BBS portal, Tianya.cn, republished an article from the Singapore-based Lianhe Zaobao, which commented that Chinese netizens regard the President's choice of Southern Weekend as the President's way of criticizing Chinese censorship. Taiwan's Central News Agency commented that the President's interview with Southern Weekend left a "Bomb of Freedom" on the Chinese Mainland, and the article was picked up and republished by Mainland bloggers.

#### Postmortem of the Interview's Death in Guangzhou

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¶19. (C) Comment: We will never know how many ordinary Chinese were prevented from reading the President's interview, but the censorship backlash was substantial. That said, 40,000 bloggers and tweeters (and their millions of readers) discussed the significance of the

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President choosing Southern Weekend, Beijing's censorship, and Southern Weekend's protest "advertisements." "Internal" orders prohibiting Chinese media from republishing the interview are now available online, and the text of the President's note to Southern Weekend -- stating that "an educated citizenry is the key to an effective government, and a free press contributes to that well-informed citizenry" -- is making the rounds. Beijing may have murdered the President's interview, but Chinese netizens -- the technologically savvy and young -- are quite familiar with who wielded the knife. End Comment.

¶20. (SBU) This cable was coordinated with Embassy Beijing.

GOLDBECK